

1977 Carter meeting with Prime Minister Begin
Washington, July 19, 1977, 11:15 a.m.-1:10 p.m.

PARTICIPANTS

The President	The Vice President	Secretary of State Cyrus Vance
Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski	Assistant Secretary of State Alfred L. Atherton, Jr.	Ambassador Samuel Lewis
Mr. David Aaron	Mr. William B. Quandt	Mr. Hamilton Jordan
Mr. Stuart Eizenstat	Mr. Robert Lipshutz	Mr. Jody Powell
Mr. Jerry Schecter	Prime Minister Menahem Begin	Ambassador Simcha Dinitz
Mr. Shmuel Katz	Mr. Hanan Bar-On	Mr. Yehiel Kadishai
Mr. Eliahu Mizrachi	General Ephraim Poran	Mr. Yehuda Avner

President Carter: I am very grateful and honored that you are able to be here today. There is a great deal of interest in our country concerning these talks and there is a sense of anticipation. We have already been able to develop a good personal friendship and I think that this will help to minimize any differences we might have in the future and to maximize the areas of agreement. We have a chance to discuss any matters that you wish this morning, and this evening there will be a supper with about 45 other participants, the largest of these dinners we have had, and after dinner I would like to meet privately with the Prime Minister. Then again tomorrow we will talk. So we don't need to rush and we can discuss issues in detail. My Cabinet is also at your disposal and we are eager to make your stay here profitable.

We would like to discuss with you how we can work together with you and with your Arab neighbors in the search for peace in the Middle East. We have assumed a position of responsibility as one of the co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference, and, before you became Prime Minister, we met with all of the other Middle East leaders.

To begin, let me describe some of the principles that we have evolved, not as a blueprint, but rather to give you an idea of what we have discussed. Secretary Vance will go to the Middle East soon, but will leave Israel for his last stop so that he will arrive as late as possible. You can work this out with him.

President Carter: I have tried to expand on Resolution 242 in one major area-to define what is meant by a comprehensive peace. 242 only talks about the end of the state of belligerency. But I believe that peace must also include open borders, trade, friendship, student exchanges, transportation across borders, and diplomatic recognition. In short, peace should involve normalization of relations in their entirety. We have defined this in the same way with all of the leaders. This is a difficult concept for the Arab leaders. King Hussein is most amenable. President Sadat sees some possibility of this, as he told me privately, and he thinks that it could be achieved within a few years. He has mentioned five years publicly. President Assad pointed out that 18 months ago he would not have been able to make the kind of public commitment that he has made to negotiations and to peace with Israel, but now he is also able to say that. So none of the leaders have disavowed the concept, but they have stressed how difficult it will be to bring about such changes.

The territorial issue is also difficult. We do not have any maps or borders in mind. The borders will have to be mutually agreed, and they should be defensible and security should be assured. The borders should also be recognized, and this is something that you will have to settle in negotiations with your neighbors.

The last question involves the refugees. This is mentioned in the UN Resolutions. Whether the **Palestinians** should have an area that they can control locally or whether they should have a separate nation, as the Arabs propose, is a matter for negotiations. We have not thought a separate Palestinian state would be advisable, and we prefer that a homeland be tied to Jordan, but we have no plan to put forward. We have discussed this in the same way with all of the leaders. Another difficult question for the Arabs to solve is how to bring the **Palestinians** into the discussions. If there is a meeting in Geneva, we understand the Israeli position, and as you know, there are some differences among the Arabs themselves. President Sadat, and King Hussein to a lesser extent, favor Palestinian representation as part of a Jordanian delegation.

President Assad prefers a single Arab delegation and thinks that it should negotiate as a single body. Others feel that each state should have its own delegation and should deal directly with you. We have not violated any confidences and we will not reveal any positions that would embarrass any of the leaders.

After our discussions and after Secretary Vance's trip to the area, it might be a good idea for him to visit Israel last in order to report to you on the Arab attitudes. We want to accommodate your desires on this. I am eager to hear your views on how to proceed and on our role. I would also like to hear your thoughts on how the Arabs should perform to show their good faith. You might also want to discuss how Israel can take steps to help convince the Arabs to negotiate. Neither side now trusts the other and neither side fully trusts us. We want to win that trust. I would like to hear your views and I would be glad to answer any questions that you have. We will try to present your views to the Arabs as clearly as possible. We are also eager to see you and your neighbors negotiate directly. We have no desire to be an intermediary, and as soon as they show a willingness to negotiate directly, that will be fine. Let me repeat that you are very welcome here.

Prime Minister Begin: Mr. President, may I start with a word of praise for Ambassador Lewis. He is the most popular diplomat in Israel. My Foreign Minister and I have full confidence in him. That confidence has been already of great importance as was proved the night before I left Israel. We had information on movements of Egyptian forces and we have to be very careful. We made a mistake in October 1973. We had all the necessary information, but the intelligence was evaluated poorly. We suffered a great deal in that war and we can't let that happen again. We did not mobilize this time, but we did strengthen our position in the south. I called the US Ambassador and I asked him to find out about Egyptian intentions. These were clarified to our satisfaction and it proves that confidence can lead to good results. On Lebanon we have also talked with Ambassador Lewis. I told him that we do not want any Lebanese territory; that we do not want war; and that we will not let down our Christian allies. We have been a minority in the past, but we are not one now. Please show the President the map.2 (General Poran produces map of South

Lebanon, with Muslim, Christian, and Druze villages indicated.) As you can see, the Christians are outnumbered. There are five thousand members of the PLO who live in their midst and who shell their villages every night. We come to their rescue and we aim our artillery at the sources of fire that threaten the Christian villages. Otherwise, they would be wiped out. The fourth point I made to Ambassador Lewis about South Lebanon is that we will not take you by surprise. We will consult you if any contingencies arise. It is fair to say that we will not let the Christian minority be destroyed. That is our main concern.

President Carter: Do you feel that the central government is the best protector of the Christians in the long run?

Prime Minister Begin: Yes, President Sarkis himself is a Christian, but he is helpless. The PLO almost destroyed Lebanon.

President Carter: Our inclination is to give him some military assistance.

Prime Minister Begin: That's a good idea, but then a complete solution to the PLO in the south will still be required. For now, the PLO only attacks the Christians, but later they might aim at us. We want real quiet. We basically agree to the idea of your helping the Lebanese army.

President Carter: Do you consider Resolutions 242 and 338 as preconditions?

Prime Minister Begin: We accept them.

President Carter: As the basis for negotiations?

Prime Minister Begin: Yes, but we should be free of demands for prior conditions.

President Carter: When you say that, is that contrary to the idea that 242 and 338 are the basis for negotiations? It would help if you could say that they are the basis for negotiations.

Prime Minister Begin: I'll say it publicly. Yes, sir. Now let me turn to the framework of peace. I have a proposal which has been adopted by the Cabinet. I had a hard time keeping it secret. Everyone wanted to know about it, but I felt that you should be the first one to hear about it, so I have brought it to you. Let me cover the main elements and I will leave a copy with you.

Point One. Israel favors a reconvening of the Geneva Peace Conference by the two co-chairmen. According to Article III of Resolution 338, there should be negotiations between the parties concerned under appropriate auspices. We acknowledge that Resolution 338 includes 242. There is no doubt about our attitude on these two documents or about Geneva. Point Two. Who shall participate?

President Carter: This is your chance to make real news. (Laughter.)

Prime Minister Begin: I will be telling the press about our proposal. The participants should be the accredited delegations of the sovereign states of Israel, Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Syria did not attend before, but probably this time it will. We can talk later about what we will do if they refuse to come on this basis and insist on the PLO. Point Three. The states should go to Geneva with no prior conditions and no demands for prior commitments. Geneva should begin with public sessions, and then three mixed commissions should be formed: Egypt-Israel, Syria-Israel, Jordan Israel. These should be mixed commissions such as existed at Rhodes. This is not new for the Arabs. They sat with us before. We want to negotiate peace treaties, so we suggest three mixed commissions. Their goal would be negotiation of peace treaties.

Point Four. I was pleased to see recently that the State Department recently said that peace treaties were an important objective.¹¹ If we can get agreement on that, it would be very important. In the past, we have talked about the essence of peace - diplomatic relations, trade, and so forth. We don't need that. In international law, when one says peace treaty, that includes the termination of the state of war, and then a chapter on territories, which will spell out the permanent boundaries, and then a chapter on diplomatic relations and economic clauses. There were peace treaties signed after both World Wars I and II. The U.S. also signed a treaty with Japan along these lines. But first the state of war must end, and then good relations must be defined. So let us try to negotiate peace treaties, article by article. The chairmanship of the mixed commissions would rotate, and the negotiations would be face-to-face. We will work on three separate peace treaties. This may take some time, but when it is done, we will reconvene the Geneva Conference to sign. This is our proposal.

Going back to the question of participation, in case Egypt says they will not go to

Geneva unless the PLO attends, then they will make the Geneva Conference impossible. The PLO was not there four years ago. If they insist, then they are responsible for Geneva not convening. Any change in the participants must be accepted by all. We cannot accept the PLO being there. My friend, Shmuel Katz, will describe how we see the PLO later. They have a charter which declares our state null and void. They want to destroy us. Therefore, we have no reason to negotiate with them. Our alternatives are:

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1. Through the good offices of the United States, we would set up mixed commissions somewhere without Geneva. This could be done through normal diplomatic channels with U.S. good offices. We could start negotiations for a peace treaty in this way. In the Rhodes agreements of 1949, three mixed commissions met under Mr. Ralph Bunche, who represented the UN, but who really used his good offices on behalf of the United States. This led to the negotiation of armistice agreements which were accepted and signed and were meant to be a step toward peace. Twenty-nine years later and four wars later, we want that peace. We have an obligation to work for it.
 2. The second alternative would be to adopt the idea suggested in 1972 of proximity talks¹² that might take place in New York. We accept this method as well. The US can set up mixed commissions and negotiate through proximity talks.

That is the end of my remarks. I wanted to tell you about my people, our land, our suffering, and our care for the future as well. We do have to look to the future. I have made a serious proposal and I have an open mind to hear your ideas. We want to keep the momentum and to maintain direct contact. With God's help, we may eventually negotiate peace treaties.

President Carter: Let me respond briefly. I think your major points are very clear. In some ways, they are very encouraging. I am sure your desire to go to the peace conference is genuine and I am grateful for that attitude. There are some obstacles that we see based on our long discussions with Arab leaders. First, let me say that we have no preference on the details of an ultimate agreement, nor on procedures, nor on any arrangements concerning the PLO. On the basis of President Sadat's public

comments on July 16, which he made at my request,¹³ he seems to accept Resolutions 242 and 338, as does King Hussein. I think President Assad also does. Assad was very insistent that the Arabs negotiate as a unified body, not as individual nations. Sadat does not agree. Hussein also prefers individual delegations. My guess is that if Sadat and Hussein show strong leadership, Assad will agree to go to Geneva and to divide into national negotiating groups. This is my impression. There will be a need for us to meet them again and for them to coordinate their position on this.

A second problem we see has to do with territory. If Israel reserves the question of borders until Geneva, that would be adequate. You don't need to make any promises on final borders. You can just adopt the language of the UN Resolutions on withdrawal. Then the depth and the other arrangements can be discussed at Geneva. That would be an adequate degree of flexibility. But I want to speak frankly. On the question of the West Bank, of Judea and Samaria, it is very important for the Arabs. This has to be a subject of negotiations. For their people and for your people, the question of the West Bank will be important to keep open for discussions and not to be closed as a subject before negotiations begin. The attitude of your government to encourage new settlements could prevent a peace conference itself and I recognize how important this is to you. One of the concerns that was very acute here is the attitude of you and your government on settlements on the West Bank. It almost seems to close off any chance for negotiations.

The third question has to do with the PLO. Your predecessors' view, as I understood it, is that the PLO might attend Geneva as part of an Arab delegation or as part of the Jordanian delegation - at least as **Palestinians**, if not as the PLO. We also agreed in Sinai II that if the PLO were to recognize Israel's right to exist, then it might be possible for us to negotiate with them. We know that there is a question of whether you would then participate or not. We have refrained from contacts with representatives of the Palestinian organizations and we respect the agreement that we made with you. However, we have told the PLO through others that if they would endorse 242 publicly and if they were to acknowledge the right of Israel to exist in peace, then we would talk to them and listen to their position. This is difficult for us. My understanding, and perhaps I am wrong, is that Israel would meet with the PLO if

the PLO or Palestinian leaders would acknowledge Israel's right to exist permanently as a free nation. So these are the three different questions that Arab leaders have raised with us: the framework of negotiations at Geneva, and for after the conference begins; the settlements on the West Bank of the Jordan which prejudge the outcome of negotiations; and some way for the PLO or **Palestinians** to be represented at Geneva. These are the most difficult and they might prevent further progress. Secretary Vance has met with the Arab leaders more than I have and he may want to add something or to correct me.

Secretary Vance: You have given an accurate summary of the Arab views. The issues as indicated are the question of borders, of the Palestinian entity, and the procedural question of Palestinian representation at Geneva. These are the critical issues, along with the definition of the nature of peace.

President Carter: One possibility has been that the **Palestinians** might not be included at Geneva at the beginning, but when the question of the refugees is put on the agenda, they might come in then.

Prime Minister Begin: Arab refugees and Jewish refugees.

President Carter: We have no objection to that. We have no preference on this. My motive is to keep the discussions open and flexible. There are some things on which each side feels very deeply, but we have no preconceived ideas.

Prime Minister Begin: Prime Minister Rabin did not agree to the PLO participating in a Jordanian delegation. His view was that Palestinian Arabs could be accepted within a Jordanian delegation. **We too are Palestinians**. Mr. Katz will describe our views on this later. To convene the Geneva Conference, we are agreeable to Palestinian Arabs being in the Jordanian delegation and we will not look at their credentials, but they cannot be PLO.

Dr. Brzezinski: I have a question. When you speak of three commissions, are these three bilateral commissions? Or are they mixed?

Prime Minister Begin: Mixed.

Dr. Brzezinski: Does that mean Israel plus three others, or Israel-Egypt, Israel-Jordan,

Israel-Syria?

Prime Minister Begin: The latter. We see three simultaneous, separate procedures. They can talk day and night to reach agreement.

President Carter: If before Geneva, or during Geneva, it is advisable for Lebanon to participate, would this be all right?

Prime Minister Begin: We would agree. I left them out because of the precedent. We don't want to change the composition of Geneva, but it would be all right.

President Carter: I understand.

Prime Minister Begin: So we might have four mixed commissions.

President Carter: There is no way to avoid the larger question of the refugees, both **Palestinians** and the Jews from Arab countries. On that issue, the two nations negotiating together might not be enough. Refugees have come from many countries, and on that subject, perhaps all four nations would have to meet?

Prime Minister Begin: I want to understand your question. Do you mean one Arab delegation?

President Carter: I don't know. But on borders, it is obvious that Israel and Syria would have to agree, and Israel and Egypt, and so forth, but on the question of refugees, and the Palestinian question, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and maybe Lebanon, might also participate. This could not be settled in separate bilateral negotiations.

Prime Minister Begin: We have no objection. That would be my first reaction.

Shmuel Katz: Let me show you another map.¹⁴ The Prime Minister referred to the Yom Kippur War. There were errors made then. We were fearful for our existence. When we speak of the PLO, we have in the back of our mind, whenever we consider the Palestinian problem, the threat posed by the entire Arab world. This map shows the problem as we see it. (Large map showing all Arab countries in red, with Israel in blue.) As of now, in all of the Arab states children in schools are taught that this is a single Arab world which must be unified and this unity must be restored by closing this little gap of Israel. There are 21 sovereign Arab countries. They occupy 12 million

square kilometers. All of us understand why an Arab who grows up with that kind of indoctrination believes that it is his patriotic duty and his moral imperative to destroy Israel. The purposes of the Arab nation are those referred to in the PLO charter. They want to expel Israel from the great Arab homeland and then to purge Zionism from Palestine. It is important to the Arab nation as a whole. The fact that this is their purpose is expressed in various ways. I can quote from an Arab journal, al-Mussawar, of December 1968. "The expulsion of our Palestinian brethren from their homes is no cause for anxiety, because they are now in Arab countries, but for the world to accept our struggle against Israel, it must be portrayed as the uprooted **Palestinians** against Israel." This shows that the Palestinian state is a recent idea to replace the idea of homeless refugees. This puts Israel in a position of a predator which has driven refugees out. Their scenario, based on a mythological history which has little relationship to fact, is reflected in Arafat's statement at the UN 15 when he said that the Arab people have been engaged in cultivating Palestine for thousands of years and they have been the guardians of the holy places. This is in total contrast to the facts. In the American context, I would suggest that one read Mark Twain, in his book, *Innocents Abroad*, where he describes a trip to Palestine one hundred and ten years ago. He describes it as a desert country of weeds, mournful expanse, and desolation. Only the Jewish people ever claimed Palestine as a homeland or ever tried to build it up. They have been the only ones to develop it. Those who are described as Palestinian Arabs are in fact new immigrants. Some came in during the nineteenth century, but the largest Arab immigration to Palestine came after the Zionist revival of the country. We believe that those Arabs who did not flee in 1948 were probably the only ones who had deep roots in the country. Peasants after all do not flee, even in the midst of war. The Palestinian Arabs were told by their leaders to leave, but it was not natural that they would do so. Those who stayed are probably the only real local Arabs.

The term **Palestinian** until recently was applied to us. There were many organizations in the United States that included the name Palestine. For example, there was the League for Labor Palestine.¹⁶ (Mr. Katz proceeds to read a long list of such names.) All of these referred to the Zionist effort. Palestine was thought of as a Jewish country

and was not claimed as an Arab center until modern times.

Prime Minister Begin: I would like to remind you that when the British Mandate was set up in 1922, in the preamble it stated that the League of Nations recognized the historical connection between the Jewish people and Palestine. Educated men knew that Palestine meant the land of Israel. The name Palestine originated after the Bar Kochba revolt in Roman times, when the area was renamed Syrie et Palestina. This goes back 18 centuries. Since then, the word Palestine has existed. There has always been a historical connection between the Jews and Palestine.

Mr. Katz: In 1919, Faisal agreed with President Weizmann in a document that was signed between the Arab state and the "representative of Palestine," which meant "of the Jews." After the Mandate, the Arabs objected to the word Palestine, preferring the word South Syria. President Assad referred to Palestine just recently as southern Syria, and I can leave to your imagination the political implications of that usage. The Arabs did, after all, get three-quarters of the country, since both sides of the Jordan River are considered Palestine. By 1922, the British created Trans-Jordan and removed it from the Balfour Declaration's terms. The Arabs built their state on the other side of the Jordan. The British were able to do this because the French gave up some of their claims to the West of Jordan. In 1919, the French took the position that a Jewish state should be established on both sides of the Jordan, since the western sector alone did not provide for adequate defense. The PLO claims both sides of the Jordan, and the Palestinians therefore already have a homeland on the east bank of Jordan. On another point, although the PLO is organized and armed and trained by the Arab states, today it is also getting Soviet support. Arms reach the PLO through Iraq and Syria. There are some 30 to 36 training courses in the Soviet Union for the PLO.

Prime Minister Begin: I want to discuss the question you raised about settlements. This is a very serious matter for us. I want to speak with candor. No settlements will be allowed to become obstacles to negotiations. Jews and Arabs live together in Jaffa, in Haifa. There are many towns named Hebron in the United States, and many named Bethel and Shiloh.

President Carter: Just 20 miles from my home town there is a Bethel and a Shiloh,

each of which has a Baptist Church!

Prime Minister Begin: Imagine the Governor of a state declaring that all American citizens except Jews could go to live in those towns. Can we be expected, as the government of Israel, to prevent a Jew from establishing his home in the original Bethel? In the original Shiloh? These will not be an obstacle to negotiation. The word "non-negotiable" is not in our vocabulary. But this is a great moral issue. We cannot tell Jews in their own land that they cannot settle in Shiloh. We cannot do that. This is a serious issue to us. One day I hope you will come to visit Shiloh.

President Carter: I have already been to Bethel.

Prime Minister Begin: You will find it interesting to see Shiloh. There are many Biblical stories about it.

President Carter: I can tell you that this might prevent a Geneva Conference from even being convened. Even though you see this as no problem for negotiations, my impression of the attitudes of the other leaders is that they would view this as a sign of bad faith on Israel's part. The previous government discouraged settlements, and I have no reason to draw conclusions, but I would not be responsible if I did not point this out to you. If you could say that there would be no new settlements until after you had met with the Arab leaders in Geneva, that would be a very constructive step.

Prime Minister Begin: Thank you, Mr. President.

President Carter: We should adjourn now and our discussions can continue later. We can also talk tonight. I have one other question. We have frequent requests from Saudi Arabia concerning Israeli overflights. We have found Saudi Arabia helpful to us in bringing about a better attitude in Egypt, Jordan and Syria. They want peace because they sit on great wealth and they do not want war. I don't know how important these overflights are to you, but it would help if you could refrain from invading their air space. We have asked this before. If there is information that you need, we might be able to provide it for you in some form. It would help if you could refrain from these flights. This is a problem for us. If Israel wants peace, they wonder why you have to overfly their territory. It creates a feeling among the Arabs that Israel is not sincere about wanting to reduce tensions. I wanted you to know about

this problem.

Prime Minister Begin: Yes, Mr. President. I am hearing about this for the first time. General Poran tells me that the Saudis have a base at Tabuk, which is a huge base aimed at us. So we need to overfly their territory. But I will consider your request when I get back home. If there is no risk to us, I will do what is possible. We want an atmosphere of goodwill. General Siilavasuo helped recently with the Egyptians and we exchanged some compliments with General Gamasy. So we want goodwill.

President Carter: Gestures can help. If there is information that you need about Tabuk, we could ask the Saudis for a description of their plans and give you a reply. It would help if you could refrain from the flights.

Prime Minister Begin: The week after I return I will tell you. We will do our best.

President Carter: I asked President Sadat recently to decrease his propaganda against Israel and to withdraw the excess troops in Sinai. He is also returning 19 bodies of Israeli war dead.

Prime Minister Begin: We appreciate that.

President Carter: He also said in the last week that he supports the UN Resolutions and he did all of these things as a gesture of good faith. In the few weeks ahead, let's all try to lessen tensions. I have learned a lot from our talks and I appreciate your sharing with me your views. You can continue your talks this afternoon with members of my Cabinet, and then we will review prospects tomorrow and summarize our positions.

Prime Minister Begin: With Secretary Brown, I would like to bring up the question of our defense requirements.

President Carter: He is prepared to hear you on this.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v08/d52>